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Pattern of conferences

Reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In its resolution 59/265, entitled "Pattern of conferences", the General Assembly addressed a number of requests to the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The present report has been prepared in compliance with those requests and should be examined in conjunction with the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/60/93).

* A/60/50 and Corr.1.

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I. Introduction

1. The reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has been both revolutionary and evolutionary. It is revolutionary in that the Department has undergone a transformation from conference services to conference management and is gradually moving towards integrated global management. It is also evolutionary because the Department has to pilot new reform measures continuously in order to improve its performance without jeopardizing the smooth functioning of the intergovernmental bodies.

2. Reform has to take place in stages. Now in its third year, this reform has reached the stage where areas for improvement have been identified and the necessary restructuring has been implemented. However, the full benefits of reform can only materialize over time, with further changes in mentality and modus operandi. Moreover, owing to the servicing nature of its operations, the performance of the Department is heavily affected by external factors, such as document submission by author departments and meetings planning of the intergovernmental bodies, which tend to fluctuate drastically and often cannot be easily planned in advance.

3. The goals of conference management are fourfold: quality, quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness. As conference management is a highly dynamic process, determined by the nature of the workings of the intergovernmental machinery, and in view of the inherent contradictions among the four goals mandated by the General Assembly, it is necessary for the Department to strike a delicate balance among them and achieve results that are in the best interest of the smooth functioning of the intergovernmental machinery.

4. To achieve those goals requires a combination of interconnected approaches. First, there must be proactive upstream planning to achieve predictability in demand, an approach that the Department has been focusing on since the early stages of reform. Secondly, downstream capacity for servicing meetings and processing documents must be synchronized with the planning to remove bottlenecks in supply, which has been an important project of the Department since the beginning of 2005. Lastly and equally important, the success of conference management depends critically on clear accountability on the part of all involved. Planning, synchronization and accountability are therefore the three pillars of a dynamic process of conference management from a full-system perspective.

II. Dynamic conference management

5. Advance planning is the first crucial step towards effective management of conference services. Two of the most important measures taken so far in this respect are the management of the calendar of conferences and meetings and the slotting system for documentation. But planning alone is not enough. To realize its full potential, there has to be adequate downstream capacity to back it up. Consequently, a number of measures have been experimented with, such as linking capacity to expected output in order to ensure that what is planned can be implemented.

A. Meetings management

6. As most of the work of the Department results from and feeds into the meetings of intergovernmental bodies, meetings management can make or break the whole concept of conference management. In recent years, greater predictability has been achieved, thanks to strict enforcement of the new rules on the provision of services, the consistent efforts of the Department, as reported in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/60/93), the proposals made in the context of the revitalization of the General Assembly and the use of e-Meets. At the same time, much attention has been paid to the synchronization of planning with servicing capacity, especially the interpretation capacity.

7. To carry out its mandate as the appropriate executive authority to oversee, coordinate and enhance the global management and delivery of United Nations conference services, the Department has focused, in particular, on enhancing the management of the calendar of conferences and meetings.

8. The 2006-2007 draft calendar of conferences and meetings for New York-based bodies has been generated by e-Meets, on an experimental basis. This reversed the traditional approach whereby individual departments or intergovernmental bodies were asked to submit their requests for biennial sessional dates, which were incorporated into the draft calendar and accommodated as much as possible. In the new approach, the historical pattern of sessions, reporting lines and other dependencies were studied and the availability of established capacities was taken into account. Then, sessional dates were proposed by the Department, through e-Meets, to the technical secretariats of the calendar bodies, with the aim of producing a relatively even workload for most of the year. After adjustments were made through negotiations with the bodies that could not accept the proposed dates, the draft calendar includes the agreed dates for all bodies. Based on the success achieved and lessons learned from this experiment, a similar approach can be followed in future for bodies based at the other duty stations.

9. In planning the calendar, every effort has been made to avoid simultaneous peaks in workload at various duty stations, in particular United Nations Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV) and the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON). When an occasional peak at one duty station coincides with a low period at another, staff loans take place to make more efficient use of the resources available.

10. Furthermore, the Department has, in full consultation with the bodies concerned, continued to evaluate the actual utilization of conference services by intergovernmental bodies and expert groups at all duty stations. This information is used to calculate the week-by-week meeting requirements. Capacity is then put in place to match the expected use, rather than the full entitlement of the bodies in session.

11. Finally, procedures for ad hoc changes to the calendar are being strengthened at all duty stations. In future, new requests for servicing meetings, whether informal or ad hoc, will be provided with services only if fully endorsed by the appropriate intergovernmental mechanisms or from resources available through cancellations.

12. Additional steps to manage the calendar globally can be anticipated as e-Meets becomes the global tool for meetings planning and as the link between e-Meets and

APG, a software for interpreter assignment, also becomes global. Meeting planners at all duty stations will then have access to information on overall workload and capacity using e-Meets/APG as the central database. That will facilitate the global planning of all sessions of calendar bodies.

13. At this stage, the linkage between e-Meets and APG has been completed in New York. At UNOG, the first phase of e-Meets was implemented in February 2005 for meetings planning and the second phase for the electronic processing of requests was completed in June. At UNOV, e-Meets is used for Vienna-based bodies meeting at headquarters. At UNON, e-Meets has been in operation since 2003. At the same time, APG is fully operational at all four duty stations. Linking e-Meets with APG can be foreseen for these duty stations.

14. In light of the interactive relationship between the meetings chain and the documentation chain, the Department has also been exploring ways to establish a linkage between the two. The UNOV system already incorporates both meetings and documentation requirements. The recent success of UNOG in establishing a working linkage of e-Meets and e-DRITS is also a step in that direction. The linkage allows UNOG to conduct a complex review of both meeting and documentation requirements of any session, the estimation of workload and thus the more accurate planning of resources to cover the session. Experience with this project will be carefully reviewed.

15. In spite of the best efforts of the Department, it has to be recognized that meetings management is a highly volatile exercise and the results are far from satisfactory. Both long-term calendar management and short-term meetings programming are still heavily dependent on the decisions of the intergovernmental bodies and there is a limit to what the Department alone can do.

B. Document management

16. The management of documentation covers the whole process of submission, processing and issuance. As the slotting system put in place since the beginning of reform focused initially on submission, the Department has extended its efforts further downstream this year to cover gradually the entire spectrum. This has turned out to be a particularly complicated process that requires as much adjustment in implementation as intensity in advance planning (since only 50 per cent of the total documentation workload can be slotted). Even though a prototype of the e-Doc system has been designed for document management and training in document submission has been arranged for some author departments, more adjustments and development are necessary before e-Doc can become a truly effective tool for managing documents.

1. Submission

17. Greater efforts have been made to enforce the slotting system strictly, in particular through the interdepartmental task force on documentation chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, the continuous consultations with the author departments and the abolition of re-slotting, i.e. rescheduling of documents to accommodate late submissions.

18. Parallel to this, in 2004, the Department continued its proactive approach towards the reduction of the excessive volume of documentation through enforcement of the existing guidelines and regulations on page limits. Additionally, the need to adhere to the drafting guidelines for reports of intergovernmental bodies was emphasized with the secretaries of those bodies.

19. This two-pronged approach, which focuses on both timely submission and adherence to page limits, aims to enhance predictability in the inflow of workload and set the stage for timely processing and issuance. In view of the lack of significant progress in 2004 in both areas, all heads of author departments and offices were reminded of the need to establish a transparent accountability system within the Secretariat to remedy the situation.

2. Processing

20. Since early 2005, based on lessons learned from its proactive document management experience, the Department has identified areas for further workflow adjustments. It began to introduce both vertical and horizontal synchronization in an effort to turn documents around within four weeks, as provided for in the relevant General Assembly resolutions. Vertical synchronization seeks to match the capacity of each and every stage of downstream processing, including editing, referencing, translation, text-processing, reproduction and distribution, to its expected output. Horizontal synchronization seeks to ensure a balance of the processing capacity across languages and against expected output to avoid bottlenecks in the simultaneous distribution of documents in all six official languages.

21. The first pilot project involved the Central Planning and Coordination Service and the Translation Services. To begin with, the Central Planning and Coordination Service conducted a comprehensive analysis of the entire document inflow pattern between 2002 and 2004, including all slotted and unslotted documents. It made adjustments in accordance with the slotting schedule of 2005 and projected the total expected output for 2005 on a week-by-week and service-by-service basis. Based on that projection, the Translation Services actively managed their staffing level, including regular staff, temporary assistance, contractual and off-site translation. This planning exercise, though still in its very early stage, helps combine planning and processing which were not adequately integrated before. When successful, the Department intends to apply the experience gained to all the other units involved in document processing.

22. For all the reform measures in place or envisaged, the Department continues to face hard choices in its daily operations, the biggest dilemma being how to handle late submissions, which are a common occurrence. For those unacceptably late submissions, the Department can either adhere to the four-week turnaround time and risk not issuing them for the meetings, or give them high priority to ensure their issuance in time for deliberation, thus penalizing other documents submitted on time. In many instances, the Department is forced to take the latter approach so as not to disrupt the smooth functioning of the intergovernmental machinery, thereby effectively returning to the "crisis management" mode of operations. The domino effect of rushing through late submissions is also responsible for most of the cases where documents take more than four weeks for processing or are issued less than six weeks before consideration. To increase transparency, the Department is

developing analytical instruments to identify more effectively the causes and impact of the late submission of documentation.

3. Issuance

23. The timely issuance of documents is the ultimate goal of the document management system. A review of the issuance of documentation in 2004 indicates a mixed picture. Delays were caused partly by late and lengthy submissions and their effect on the whole document processing chain and partly by the lack of processing capacity in the Department. What is most disturbing is that a considerable number of documents were distributed to Member States less than a week before scheduled meetings. Realizing that such delays are much more disruptive than cases of late issuance that do not meet but come close to meeting the six-week distribution benchmark, the Department has established internal operational guidelines to minimize them. At any rate, the Department will make every effort not to contribute to already late documents by exceeding the four-week processing time.

24. To better review its experience with the document management system, the Department has undertaken a pilot self-evaluation project on the effectiveness of the slotting system, with the help of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and the participation of author departments. It will review the document cycle and make proposals on how to enhance the timely submission and the turnaround time of documents.

C. Transparency and accountability

25. In order for reform to succeed, there must be transparency and accountability in decision-making and implementation so that decisions are based on accurate information, implementation is closely monitored, adjustments are made in a timely manner and those involved are held responsible for the results achieved. A culture of transparency and accountability must prevail throughout the Department. As external factors have a strong impact on the work of the Department, such transparency and accountability should likewise extend beyond the Department. In line with its tradition of providing meetings-related statistics in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences and in response to the repeated requests of the Member States, the Department will broaden the scope of the information it collects and share it with the Member States to facilitate their provision of more targeted and relevant guidance. As a first step, it will start to provide detailed information on submission by author departments (see annex).

26. Within the Department, internal communication has been stepped up to ensure better exchanges of information. In addition to the weekly meetings of the Departmental Management Group, which discusses and takes decisions on cross-cutting issues affecting the whole Department, the Under-Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General have held regular bilateral meetings with the directors of the divisions within the Department and have decided to expand them into bilateral meetings once every two months to include the chiefs of service. The totally revamped departmental Intranet website launched in June 2005 provides the senior management with another effective and interactive tool of information and communication with the staff at large.

1. Document management

27. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is establishing new reporting standards to provide greater transparency in documentation services to the intergovernmental bodies. In addition to the author department-specific information contained in annex I, the Department intends to initiate a new mechanism of meeting-body-specific evaluation and provide to the bodies concerned detailed information on how their documentation requirements are met. This new methodology recognizes that different meeting bodies may operate on different dynamics and that these factors to a considerable extent dictate their specific documentation needs. Moreover, the intergovernmental bodies are in the best position to judge whether reasons for delayed submission and issuance are acceptable and their satisfaction is the ultimate goal of documentation services.

28. As from the 2005 substantive session of the Economic and Social Council and the sixtieth session of the General Assembly, the Department will provide detailed advance information on the status of pre-session documentation to the relevant intergovernmental bodies and author departments. Moreover, when the submission deadlines for documents are missed and the resulting delayed issuance will seriously affect deliberations about them in the intergovernmental bodies, the Department will send out a message to the bodies and author departments concerned to warn them of such delays and the consequences so that remedial measures can be developed in due course.

29. Another proposal worth consideration in this regard is the inclusion of the submission of documents on time and within page limits as a performance indicator of the author departments within the context of results-based budgeting.

2. Financial management

30. The Department has always attached great importance to maintaining a sound budgetary position and has been able to discharge all its functions within its allocated resources over the past years.

31. A mechanism has been put in place for regular monitoring of resources and outputs. The Departmental Management Group conducts monthly reviews of expenditures and quarterly reviews of expenditures and output, and identifies solutions as soon as any problem or anomaly is detected. Much attention is paid to the two biggest cost drivers, namely, overtime and temporary assistance for meetings, with detailed information on usage provided to all programme managers concerned on a regular basis. With enhanced accuracy in workload projections and better capacity planning, it has been possible to achieve a better combination of resources, such as temporary assistance, off-site translation and contractual translation, and significantly reduce costly last-minute recruitment.

III. Integrated global management

32. The first stage of the global management project has been completed, as reflected in the reports of the 2004 task forces on the harmonization of statistical indicators, budget and finance, contractual services, human resources and corporate image and client orientation. The use of common statistical indicators at

Headquarters, UNOG, UNOV and UNON now allows for meaningful comparisons in the delivery of conference services by the four duty stations.

33. In addition, for the biennium 2006-2007, a consolidated budget was prepared which, for the first time, covers the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the conference servicing entities at UNOG, UNOV and UNON. The selection of senior conference managers has proceeded smoothly through active consultations at the highest levels of management in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and at the other three duty stations. The lateral transfer of language staff has been extended to cover all regional commissions.

34. In 2005, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management proceeded with the second stage of its integrated global management project aimed at coordinating conference service operations at the four duty stations (New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi) and at better utilizing the resources allocated to it in the consolidated results-based budget.

35. As recommended by OIOS in document A/59/133, four additional task forces were established in January 2005, on information technology, meeting servicing, examinations and training and documentation. Like the 2004 task forces, they were composed of members from the four duty stations.

36. On the basis of the coordination meetings of conference managers of 2004 and 2005, and the work accomplished by the nine task forces in the two years, a compendium of policies, practices and procedures is being compiled by the Department. The scheduled date for the completion of the draft compendium is early 2006. It will then be sent to conference managers at all four duty stations for validation before being finalized and implemented across the board. The purpose of the compendium is to standardize conference servicing procedures and practices across the duty stations with a view to promoting comparability and strengthening planning and coordination.

37. It should be noted, however, that although the two-year global management project that focuses on norm-setting will be completed by the end of 2005, it is but the beginning of a long process of implementation that will continue to evolve in response to new challenges.

IV. Conclusions

38. The reform is becoming more and more integrated with the daily operations of the Department. The proactive approach has resulted in a Department that is less reactive, but more responsive to client needs. With the focus on full-system benefits, the Department is paying more attention to the end results and overall performance. It is strongly believed that reform measures should not be viewed in isolation of each other, but from a long-term and full-system perspective. The Member States, for their part, should ensure that the goals they set for the Department are well-balanced, properly prioritized in light of different operational circumstances and achievable on a sustainable basis.

39. In the coming year, the Department will continue its dynamic management of conference services in a transparent and accountable manner with a view to achieving better planning, better synchronization and better results. Obviously, its

success is measured by how well it is able to achieve the four goals mandated by the Member States. Specifically, it intends to:

- **Further refine the global management of the calendar**
- **Further synchronize capacity with expected output, with greater focus on vertical synchronization**
- **Identify areas for further improvement of the document management system, following the completion of the self-evaluation project**
- **Undertake global information technology systems analysis to identify potential for standardization, compatibility and integration in information technology development**
- **Finalize the manual of policies, practices and procedures, and put in place mechanisms to ensure its effective implementation across duty stations.**

Annex

Compliance statistics on the submission of pre-session documents[a]

2004 (January to June)

Author	*Total documents*	*Total pages*	*Documents late*	*Pages late*	*Average days late*	*Compliance (percentage)*
Board of Auditors	1	151	—	—	—	100
Chief Executives Board for Coordination	1	28	1	28	4	—
Department for Disarmament Affairs	5	95	—	—	—	100
Department of Economic and Social Affairs	212	3 871	74	1 522	14	65.1
Department for General Assembly and Conference Management	28	794	11	306	9	60.7
Department of Management	95	1 231	34	498	24	64.2
Department of Political Affairs	20	470	6	159	11	70
Department of Public Information	7	136	1	30	1	85.7
Department of Peacekeeping Operations	4	123	3	99	6	25
Executive Office of the Secretary-General	—	—	—	—	—	—
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia	1	10	1	10	24	—
International Civil Service Commission	32	446	14	149	5	56.3
United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women	1	6	—	—	—	100
Joint Inspection Unit	5	26	2	20	31	60
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	3	77	3	77	28	—
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	1	26	1	26	46	—
Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States	1	3	1	3	23	—

Author	*Total documents*	*Total pages*	*Documents late*	*Pages late*	*Average days late*	*Compliance (percentage)*
Office of Internal Oversight Services	12	520	8	444	30	33.3
Office of Legal Affairs	22	542	10	437	5	54.5
Office of the Special Adviser on Africa	1	30	—	—	—	100
Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict	—	—	—	—	—	—
Regional Commissions New York Office	7	230	—	—	—	100
Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS	—	—	—	—	—	—
United Nations Development Programme	39	660	23	345	20	41
United Nations Population Fund	14	229	2	71	24	85.7
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)	1	9	1	9	11	—
United Nations Children's Fund	41	734	18	386	8	56.1
United Nations Development Fund for Women	1	12	1	12	13	—
United Nations Institute for Training and Research	1	52	—	—	—	100
World Food Programme	2	47	1	1	21	50
Total	**558**	**10 558**	**216**	**4 632**	**16**	**61.3**

[a] The information contained in the annex will be updated and presented to the 2005 substantive session of the Committee on Conferences in September.

2005 (January to June)

Author	*Total documents*	*Total pages*	*Documents late*	*Pages late*	*Average days late*	*Compliance (percentage)*
Board of Auditors	1	159	1	159	1	—
Chief Executives Board for Coordination	2	35	1	30	1	50
Department for Disarmament Affairs	2	22	—	—	—	100
Department of Economic and Social Affairs	193	3 414	66	1 280	13	65.8

Author	*Total documents*	*Total pages*	*Documents late*	*Pages late*	*Average days late*	*Compliance (percentage)*
Department for General Assembly and Conference Management	43	760	15	420	13	65.1
Department of Management	100	2 697	52	1 829	26	48
Department of Political Affairs	31	500	16	270	8	48.4
Department of Public Information	8	111	2	27	8	75
Department of Peacekeeping Operations	30	368	14	133	12	53.3
Executive Office of the Secretary-General	1	101	—	—	—	100
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia	—	—	—	—	—	—
International Civil Service Commission	30	402	14	187	3	53.3
United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women	1	11	1	11	14	—
Joint Inspection Unit	1	20	—	—	—	100
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	3	83	3	83	40	—
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	—	—	—	—	—	—
Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States	1	3	1	31	7	—
Office of Internal Oversight Services	8	230	4	163	14	50
Office of Legal Affairs	31	687	2	82	37	93.5
Office of the Special Adviser on Africa	1	34	—	—	—	100
Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict	1	10	1	10	22	—
Regional Commissions New York Office	10	143	3	85	12	70
Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS	3	67	2	39	4	33.3

Author	*Total documents*	*Total pages*	*Documents late*	*Pages late*	*Average days late*	*Compliance (percentage)*
United Nations Development Programme	56	952	36	722	23	35.7
United Nations Population Fund	13	196	5	116	20	61.5
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)	1	16	1	16	1	—
United Nations Children's Fund	35	524	4	87	5	88.6
United Nations Development Fund for Women	—	—	—	—	—	—
United Nations Institute for Training and Research	—	—	—	—	—	—
World Food Programme	2	17	1	6	19	50
Total	**608**	**11 590**	**245**	**5 786**	**17**	**59.7**